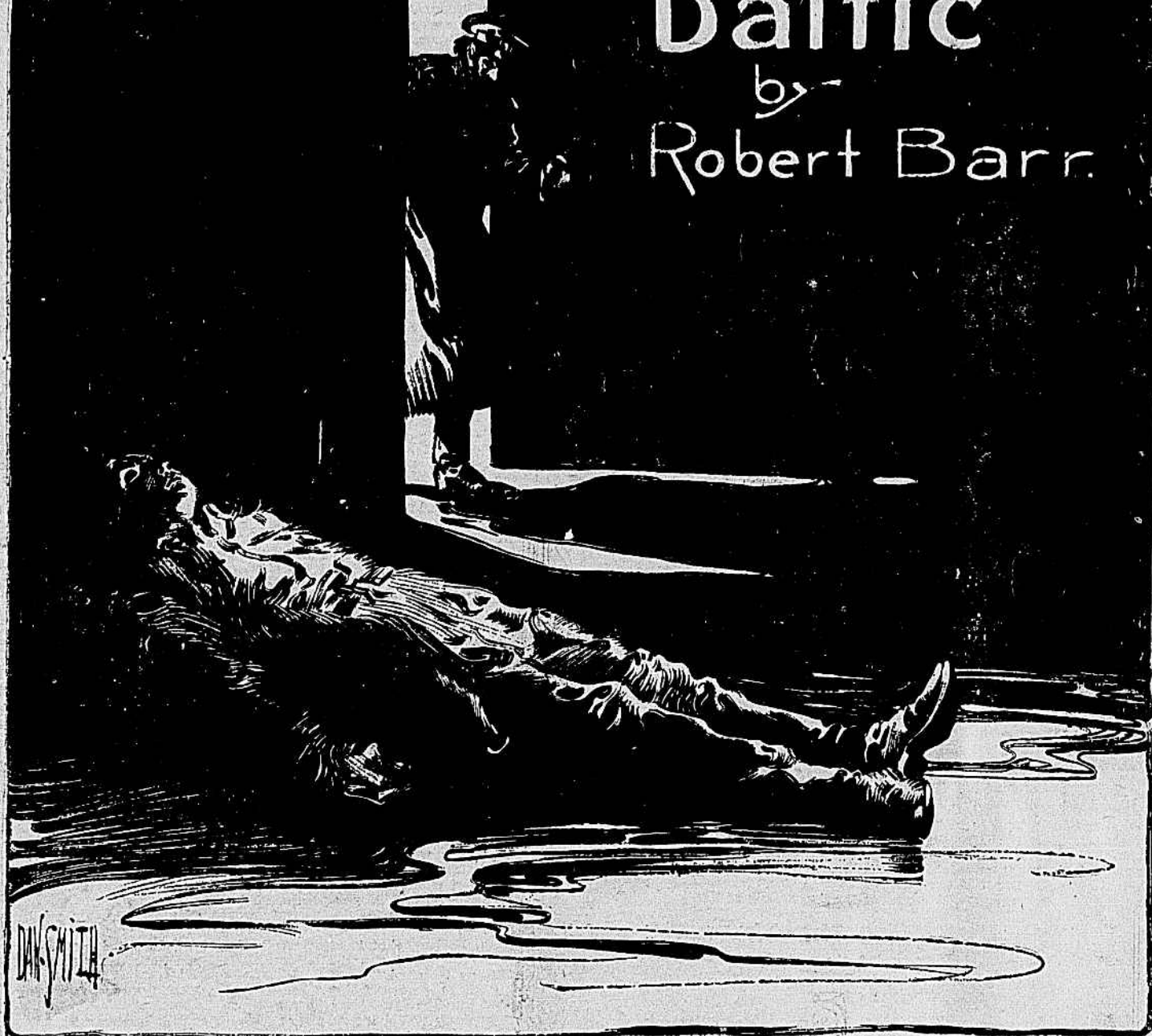


A Rock in the Baltic

by
Robert Barr.



"Even before the last of the water had run away from the cell, I lay stretched out at full length on the floor."

(Copyright, 1906, by Robert Barr.)
(All Rights Reserved.)

CHAPTER XL

THE SNOW.

Summer waned; the evenings became chill, although the sun pretended at noon that its power was undiminished. Back to town from mountain and sea shore filtered the warm-weather idlers, but no more letters came from St. Petersburg to the hill by the Hudson. So far as our girls were concerned, a curtain of silence had fallen between Europe and America.

The flat was now furnished, and the beginning of autumn saw it occupied by the two friends. Realization in this instance lacked the delight of anticipation. At last Katherine was the bachelor girl she had longed to be, but the pleasures of freedom were as Dead Sea fruit to the lips. At last Dorothy was effectually cut off from all thoughts of slavery, with unlimited money to do what she pleased with, yet after all, of what advantage was it in solving the problem that haunted her by day and filled her dreams by night. She faced the world with seeming unconcern, for she had not the right to mourn, even if she knew he were dead. He had made no claim; had asked for no affection; had written no word to her but what all the world might read. Once a week she made a little journey up the Hudson to see how her church was coming on, and at first Katherine accompanied her, but now she went alone. Katherine was too honest a girl to pretend an interest where she felt none. She could not talk of architecture when she was thinking of a man and his fate. At first she had been querulously impatient when no second communication came. Her own letters, she said, must have reached him; otherwise they would have been returned. Later, dumb fear took possession of her, and she grew silent, plunged with renewed energy into her books, joined a technical school, took lessons, and grew paler and paler until her teachers warned her she was overdoing it. Inwardly she resented the serene impassiveness of her friend, who consulted calmly with the architect upon occasion about the decoration of the church, when men's liberty was gone, and perhaps their lives. She built up within her mind a romance of devotion, by which her lover, warning in vain the stolid Englishman, had at last been involved in the ruin that Drummond's stubbornness had brought upon them both, and unjustly implicated the quiet woman by her side in the responsibility of this sacrifice. Once or twice she spoke with angry impatience of Drummond and his stupidity, but Dorothy neither defended nor excused, and so

no open rupture occurred between the two friends, nor a quarrel cannot be one-sided.

But with a woman of Katherine's temperament the final outburst had to come, and it came on the day that the first flurry of snow fell through the still air, capering in large flakes past the windows of the flat down to the muddy street far below. Katherine was standing by the window, with her forehead leaning against the plate glass, in exactly the attitude that had been her habit in the sewing-room at Bar Harbor, but now the staccato of her fingers on the sill seemed to drum a Dead March of despair. The falling snow had darkened the room, and one electric light was aglow over the dainty Chippendale desk at which Dorothy sat writing a letter. The smooth, regular flow of the pen over the paper roused Katherine to a frenzy of exasperation. Suddenly she brought her clenched fist down on the sill where her fingers had been drumming.

"My God," she cried, "how can you sit there like an automaton with the snow falling?"

Dorothy put down her pen.

"The snow falling?" she echoed. "I don't understand!"

"Of course, you don't. You don't think of the drifts in Siberia, and the two men you have known, whose hands you have clasped, manacled, driven through it with the lash of a Cossack's whip."

Dorothy rose quietly, and put her hands on the shoulders of the girl, feeling her frame tremble underneath her touch.

"Katherine," she said, quietly, but Katherine, with a nervous twitch of her shoulders flung off the friendly grasp.

"Don't touch me," she cried. "Go back to your letter-writing. You

and the Englishman are exactly alike; unfeeling, heartless. He with his selfish stubbornness has involved an innocent man in the calamity his own stupidity has brought about."

"Katherine, sit down. I want to talk calmly with you."

"Calmly! Calmly! Yes, that is the word. It is easy for you to be calm when you don't care. But I care, and I cannot be calm."

"What do you wish to do, Katherine?"

"What can I do? I am a pauper and a dependant, but one thing I am determined to do, and that is to go and live in my father's house."

"If you were in my place, what would you do, Katherine?"

"I would go to Russia."

"What would you do when you arrived there?"

"If I had wealth I would use it in such a campaign of bribery and corruption in that country of tyrants that I should release two innocent men. I'd first find out where they were, then I'd use all the influence I possessed with the American Ambassador to get them set free."